

Chapter One

# Startup

1993 - 2001

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"I served as the district's technology director allowing me to closely study and learn how schools function.."

**Charlie Kratsch**, Founder and CEO



The upstairs basement at Centennial High School...where we started.

# Humble Beginnings

Charlie Kratsch, Founder and CEO

Our early days in the Centennial School District (Minn.) were spent trying to figure out what an SIS should be and how new technologies like relational databases and web browsers should work. Not being supported by outside funding meant that we had to be creative. In addition to my corporate duties, I served as the district's

technology director allowing me to closely study and learn how schools function which in turn drove product development. Later, hiring talented developers and experienced educators resulted in the tools we needed to create what would become the foundation of everything we have today.

# Hired a K12 insider who knew the data-related problems.

In 2000, school districts struggled with disparate systems that were not accessible by key stakeholders. At Eden Prairie Schools (Minn.), technology director Karl Beach and others were writing a student information software to try and solve their data problems.

## Education soulmates

A consultant recommended that Karl meet with Charlie Kratsch. The two experienced technology directors hit it off – education soulmates if you will. In July 2000, Karl joined Infinite Campus.

## Personalizing education

I started meshing ideas we had in Eden Prairie with what Charlie wanted to do: personalize education and take the onus of planning and artifact management off the teachers. Eventually, I became The Evangelist...the title stuck.

## As The Evangelist, what did you do?

My job was to go out in all directions...to many different states and make sure people understood the company vision. Essentially, it was my job to schlep the equipment and transcribe district comments and questions on big sheets of paper while Charlie demoed the product.

## How did districts react to the vision back then?

Districts understood we were all working to move education forward...taking things in a whole new direction. It was all very powerful to be part of a startup that was going to make a big difference.

## In the year 2000:

Every Campus employee (five) could fit in a minivan, which was the “company vehicle” for off-site demos.





“There’s one thing about the people of Campus that I’m most proud of. While we sometimes used a bit of hyperbole in our enthusiasm for Transforming K12 Education<sup>®</sup>, we never lied.”

**Karl Beach**, The Evangelist

## Starting with special education and steering toward a single solution

I went to Jefferson County Schools, Colorado, because they were looking at Campus. I met with Steve Kennedy, the district’s special education director. I explained how in my worldview, having come from gifted education in Kansas, everything that’s done for a special education student...and Charlie agreed... is what could be done for every student, not just those with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The meeting continued. We agreed the special education subsystem could talk to the main system. Steve decided that yes, we

could work toward both instructional and service standards for special education students. We forged ahead...not only could we manage the IEP, but we could manage the instructional interventions as well as support services and document it all using the system. By the time we were done, in awe of the transformational possibilities, I was in tears and I believe Steve was at least close to them...and the educators in the room seemed to understand why we were. Infinite Campus has been, is, and will continue to be *that* important.

### **K12 experience**

To move education forward, hire people with K12 experience. To take things in a whole new direction, hire people who are eager to go out and share the company vision.



“Charlie had a lot of energy, good business sense, and wanted to improve education. And, I was impressed with the product he had built.”

**Dave Frankson**, Chief Architect

## Rounded up a “cowboy coder” to build a better system.

While Charlie had already built the foundation of a system to improve education, Dave Frankson rode in and refined it. The result: a single database for all applications that was accessible to all district stakeholders via a web browser.

### **Dave and the dot-com boom**

As a computer science student at the University of Minnesota in the late 1990s, it was easy to get caught up in the dot-com boom. Add an entrepreneurial streak and Dave Frankson’s future quickly developed. “Everyone wanted websites and e-commerce,” Dave said. “So as a freelancer, I built sites, online magazines and shopping carts for a variety of businesses.”

### **Frenzy. Fizzled. Failed.**

The frenzy didn’t last. “Everyone was just putting stuff on the internet without any plans to earn income from what they were producing. Many companies fizzled out; I was involved with two startups that failed.”

**“With risk comes reward.”**

Shortly after graduating, Dave met Charlie, and immediately knew he was different. “Charlie had a lot of energy, good business sense, and wanted to improve education. And, I was impressed with the product he had built.”

Even after experiencing two failed startups, Dave took the programming job at Infinite Campus. “With risk comes reward. I wanted to be at a place where I could directly influence whether something succeeded or not.”

**Works perfectly together**

Now as Chief Architect, Dave oversees more than 20 software development teams, each expanding and growing the product in different directions. “I get to be involved with so many different people and

teams. They know I’m trying to guide them down a path. I make sure things are done with consistency in mind, so everything works perfectly together.”

Dave has one overarching goal: “We try to improve internal business processes within K12 so administrators and teachers can focus more on students.”

**Entrepreneurial spirit**

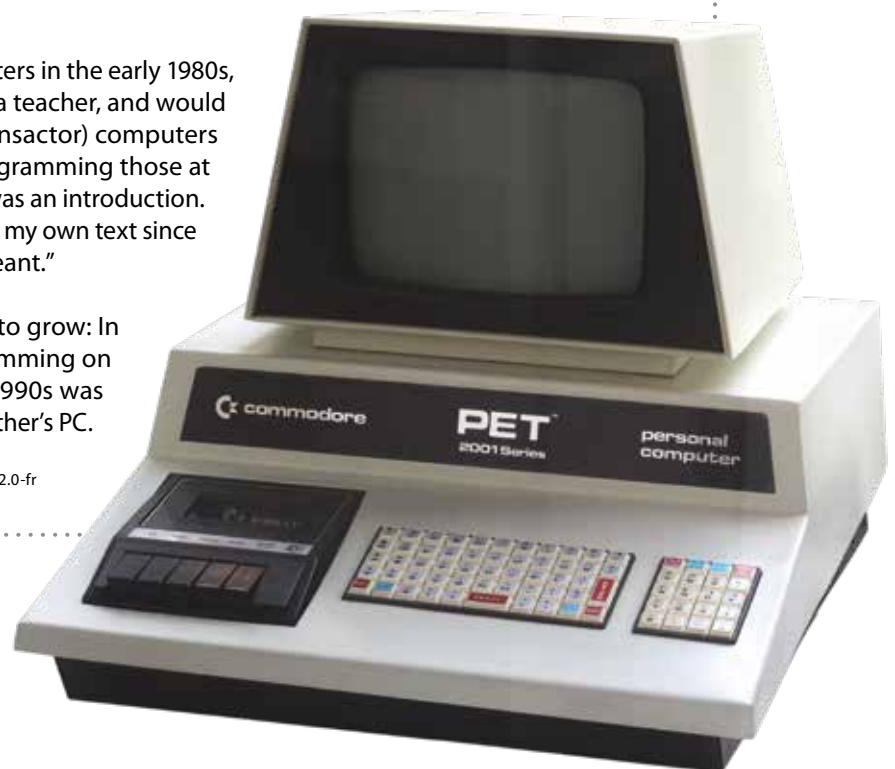
The first developer hired is now Chief Architect; our unprecedented blueprint to (consistently) enhance design and functionality of an SIS over time.

**Early start**

Not everyone had access to computers in the early 1980s, but Dave was lucky. His mom was a teacher, and would bring PET (Personal Electronic Transactor) computers home on weekends. “I started programming those at age 7...just basic programs, but it was an introduction. Mostly I replaced text in games with my own text since I didn’t know what the symbols meant.”

His passion for coding continued to grow: In the late 1980s Dave began programming on an Apple IIe in BASIC and by the 1990s was doing QuickBASIC and C++ on his father’s PC.

Photograph by Rama, Wikimedia Commons, Cc-by-sa-2.0-fr



# Identified an ideal person to interface with the customers.

Anne Flynn was working as a paraprofessional at Centennial when she first saw the “amazing” system Charlie was building. Shortly after Anne decided to resign from Centennial, she joined his startup in 1999. Anne began helping customers and was the link between end-user feedback and system enhancements.

## “I hated it.”

Pre-Campus, Centennial (and therefore Anne) was using the TIES student information system. “I hated it. Every function or task became a long, drawn-out process,” she said. “I saw what Charlie was building and fell in love. The product was just amazing, and his vision and passion for Transforming K12 Education® was unbelievable. I just had to be part of that. I knew it was going to make an impact one day, and boy, was I right.”

## “It was hot, miserable...”

In the infancy years, Anne and Charlie spent their workdays in the Centennial High School upstairs basement. “It was hot, miserable...computers were overheating, and oh did it smell. You just didn’t care because you just knew it was going to get really good someday.” After a few blistering hot summers, they upgraded to the Centennial High School band room. The “upgrade” was windowless with white walls and a black pirate flag...which still flies at the corporate headquarters today.



Centennial High School upstairs basement.

## Relaxed, yet productive work environment

“It was more casual in the startup years, but people here today would find that hard to believe,” Anne chuckled. “When I started working, Charlie would be programming while bouncing baby Ian (Charlie’s oldest son) on his knee. It’s hard to believe he’s in his 20s now.”

## Landlines...what are those?

Anne shared, “In the first few years the school janitors would come in at night to vacuum, they would unplug our, what do you call them...landlines. Customers would call saying our computers were down. We would simply plug them back in and everything was just fine.”

Now, Infinite Campus has multiple hosting options that are reliable and hold a proven record of 99.99% server availability. All equipment is managed and maintained by the Managed Services Team, which also provides nightly backups.





“There has always been a sense of pride at Infinite Campus. It just feels good to say, ‘that is where I work, and we Transform K12 Education®.’”

**Anne Flynn**, Support Advisor

## Centennial connections

In 1985, Charlie graduated from Centennial High School as valedictorian. He bypassed college to start (and sell) tech companies. Within a few years, he was financially set.

In 1993, Charlie became Centennial’s technology director. He saw that each school had its own record-keeping system, none of which helped stakeholders with decision making. Charlie envisioned a student information system that could Transform K12 Education®.

Centennial became his first customer in 1996. Currently at Infinite Campus headquarters, the meeting room closest to Charlie’s office is called Centennial. Computer classes from Charlie’s alma mater periodically visit Campus to hear about the company’s past, present and future.

### **Create an amazing product**

Lead with passion. Make the mission Transforming K12 Education®. People will join and stay because they “knew it was going to get really good someday.”





# Acquired a guy with business sense to manage growth

(once the company began to take off).

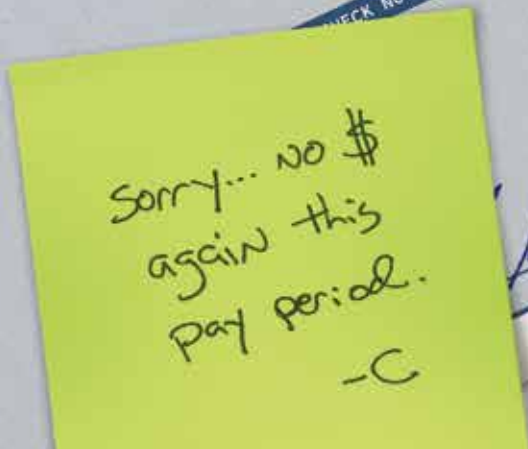
Brian Page joined the struggling startup because of what it might become, calling it a "great opportunity." However, within six months Brian didn't have enough work to do and others couldn't even be paid...so, he left to free up some money. Within a few short years, he returned to manage the "crazy" growth.

## How did you first learn about Infinite Campus?

Dave Frankson (pp. 8-9) and I were college roommates at the University of Minnesota. After graduating, he worked six months with Charlie, Don (Charlie's dad), Anne Flynn (pp. 10-11) and Karl Beach (pp. 6-7) at Infinite Campus...based in a windowless office at Centennial High School. Dave called and said they needed someone to do some accounting and requirements-gathering work. So, I drove to Centennial and met Charlie.

## Five people in a windowless office...why join them?

First, it was Charlie. He had this wonderful vision for changing K12 education. Second, the chance to join a startup intrigued me. Third... because my dad was the tech director for Lakeville Schools (Minn.), I was there when he built the first computer labs. So, I experienced and understood how technology was impacting education. It just seemed like a great opportunity... and, one of my best friends, Dave, was there.





“We couldn’t always pay everyone. Charlie and Dave went several months without getting paid.”

**Brian Page**, Chief Financial Officer

#### **How was your start?**

It was a lot of fun. The office had an open center and about eight cubes on each side. And it was like a family...there were six of us...we were close.

#### **What was your role?**

I sent system updates out to schools. Occasionally, Dave would ask me to do some coding, but I never really knew what my coding did! I helped with payroll mostly. My requirements-gathering project was done within six months and then...I certainly didn’t have 40 hours of work to do.

#### **Was the company doing well?**

There were moments I thought: I don’t know... this could be a failure. I absolutely had doubts. We couldn’t always pay everyone. Charlie and Dave went several months without getting paid. And that’s part of the reason I left after six months...I’m really not doing a whole lot here and I could easily free up some money for these guys.

#### **Hard to leave?**

Very hard...I had friends there. I was hoping that if things changed, I’d get to come back.

#### **When did you return?**

A few years later...South Dakota Department of Education chose Campus for all its districts and many Colorado districts were coming aboard so a full-time accountant was needed.

#### **So, more than 40-hour weeks?**

Yeah, we weren’t working 9 to 5. We came to get things done, so if that meant 80 hours, that was what we did.

#### **End of the startup?**

For sure. Districts followed one another to us; they’d just call and ask for our system...it was crazy. My challenge was...how are we going to do this without growing too much, too fast?